



“Reflections on a Long Term Pastorate”

In February, 2003, DV, I will complete 22 years of ministry in one pastorate, situated on Long Island, and just in the shadow of the five boroughs of New York City. During that time I have been privileged to see the church oversee the formation and particularization of two mission churches, complete with the purchase and full payment of buildings. Currently the church is composed of about 100 family units. The congregation members live in busy suburban or metropolitan areas. We are a veritable mission field in this melting pot of nationalities and socio-economic groups, and the church somewhat represents that cultural mix of our area.

Over these years of ministry we have “cleaned up the rolls” (a painstaking process that took us several years), developed and implemented a more systematic method of preparing people for communicant church membership in the OPC, trained many new officers, and added staff elders who have been able to assist the other session members and me in the administration and pastoral oversight of the flock. I have had the freedom to develop my own pulpit ministry, and especially to grow in the disciplines necessary for an expository preaching ministry.

Our challenges (I refuse to use the word “problems”!) abound. Many of the congregation members (most of whom are first generation Christians) have a long way to go in their appreciation for and use of the corporate means of grace. We grapple with how to implement legitimate and useful church “activities” in a culture that is already far too busy. We have a long way to go in effective outreach to the community in which the church is located. And how I wish (after the addition of a piano, and the renovation of the auditorium to improve the sound) that our singing better befit the glorious Lord whom we worship week by week! Nevertheless, I was called to serve as the pastor of this flock, and I hope to remain here unless the Lord clearly calls me elsewhere through the Church, His return, or my death. In my low times (which are relatively few), I feel like Jonah wanting to flee from a call to serve a modern Nineveh. In my best times (which, thankfully, are far more common), I remain passionately committed to spend the remainder of my years (now, I am at age 50) ministering to a flock that has become as dear to my heart as my own family.

The editor of *Ordained Servant* asked me to write some reflections on a long-term pastorate. In considering the best way to make this useful to the readers of this publication, I thought it best to present these reflections in three parts: challenges, benefits, and practical advice. I hope this will spur pastors and aspiring pastors who read the article to give serious consideration to the unique joys of shepherding a flock in one location for more than the common American pattern of 3-5 years.

Challenges

1. Complacency

The apostle Paul told minister Timothy to let his progress be evident to all (1 Timothy 4:15). While this bustling area and the challenges of a diverse congregation in the midst of this area keep me from boredom, it is easy to slip into a kind of ministerial automatic pilot when a man has been in one pastorate for more than a decade. Frequently I have prayed, “Lord, deliver me from carnal complacency.” Usually the Lord answers by giving us a flurry of cases of church discipline! You must be constantly growing, keeping yourself fresh, and challenging yourself and the congregation, or you will soon become a stalled pastor in a stalled church. Unfortunately, that has given long-term pastorates a bad image. “Don’t you think it’s time you

moved on?" usually really means "You're in a rut, and the congregation is, too." Beware of complacency!

2. *Too Much Dependence on One Man*

As anyone in this congregation will tell you, I abominate the phrase "my church." My usual retort when people ask about "my church" is to say that "It is Christ's church, and I am only one of its pastors." As persnickety as that sounds, I regard it as a fearful thing if people identify any expression of Christ's body, the Church, with one man. "We do it that way because of Pastor Shishko" is another no-no. You must constantly develop and use the gifts of others, cultivate your elders and deacons to serve as fully as they are able, and let yourself decrease while the gifts and graces of Christ increase in the flock. Otherwise you will become a little pastoral idol. And God dashes idols.

3. *Blind Spots*

Even as a body becomes nutritionally imbalanced and weakened because of the ingestion of only one thing, so a church can become stilted under the long-term pastorate of one man. It is a sobering thing to realize that the individual weaknesses of a pastor can all too easily become the corporate weaknesses of a congregation. (Perhaps this is one reason why so many churches under studious but isolated pastors become small groups of Bible students rather than living, functioning communities of evangelizing disciples). Thankfully, because of our area and the proximity to airports, we have been blessed to have many guest speakers who challenge us (including me) and help us see our blind spots. The session and the congregation have been generous in allowing me time away to learn from others and to be challenged even as I minister to others. Nevertheless, blind spots regarding our church weaknesses are a real problem when the pastor becomes a cataract rather than a clear lens for the congregation he serves.

Benefits

1. *The Opportunity to Build on the Victories of Early Battles*

Every pastor coming to an established church will soon work on elements of biblical reformation that he believes are necessary for the church's growth in maturity and service. A new broom does sweep clean, but usually there is much dust in the process! One of the reasons I have no interest in moving to another established congregation is because I would rather fight our current battles than the ones that marked my first few years in ministry here (Not a few of which were because of my own immaturity as a young pastor). Our move to permanent eldership (in which the congregation sees each of its elders as a pastor, c.f. Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2), the equipping of all officers so that elders really "eld" and deacons really "deac", by laws revision to make the church more presbyterian than congregational, and the implementation of disciplinary practices that truly carry the conscience of the congregation, were among the elements of biblical change that we wrestled through in the 1980's. Having labored for that reformation, it is a joy to begin to see the fruits of God's blessing on those labors, and to build even further on what was begun so painstakingly.

2. *People of the Community SEE a Long Term Ministry*

The picture of ministers coming and going gives those in the community who look on (and make no mistake about it, they do look on!) an image of a church's ministry even if they have never stepped into the church, e.g. "That church can't even keep a pastor. They get a new one every 2 or 3 years." Similarly, ministers who fall and are dismissed give another image to those in the community, e.g. "The pastor of that church was no different than anybody else." Conversely, a godly pastor who has been a fixture in a community for many years commands a respect even from those who have not personally benefited from his ministry. Opportunities to counsel, advise, assist, and minister on occasions of joy or sorrow abound for a man who has given himself to one congregation in one area for a lengthy period of time. In a time of

unparalleled transience in many communities, the long term pastor becomes a metaphor of stability and faithfulness.

3. *The Ability to Deal More Freely and Intimately With a Congregation*

The apostle Paul described his ministry to the Thessalonians as “*affectionately longing for you, (so that) we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.*” (1 Thess. 2:8). Paul was able to cultivate this depth of love in a relatively brief period of time. For most of us such pastoral affection takes much longer. It does not come with a call to serve a congregation, nor does it come after one visit by a pastor. A long term pastor who has truly given himself to the congregation he has been called to serve does become a spiritual father to his parishioners, cf. 1 Cor. 4:15. He has a hold on their hearts that has been earned by his labors of love over a long period of time and by faithful ministry in many circumstances. Unlike the feigned emotion of a stage actor, his pleas, entreaties, and expressions of love and concern are the genuine article. What power that gives to a man’s ministry! How refreshing such a ministry is in a day of ephemeral relationships and ties that often mean little more than business contacts.

4. *The Joy of Seeing Covenant Blessings*

Related to the above is the benefit of seeing the promises of God realized in the upcoming generation. I can think of fewer pastoral joys greater than that of baptizing a child, watching his or her growth under careful covenant nurture, building a tie with the child through time at church, pastoral visits, and catechism classes, dealing with the maturing child concerning his or her faithfully following Christ, witnessing his or her profession of faith, later doing pre-marital counseling as the person prepares to marry “in the Lord”, then baptizing that couple’s children in the years ahead, thus beginning the cycle again. Of course, not all such dealings with covenant children bring such gratification, but many do, and the delight is incomparable. A long term pastor sees beautiful examples of God’s faithfulness over time to believers and their children!

5. *A Superb Climate for Working with Church Officers*

Close to the joy of the previous benefit is the privilege of training church officers and then working with them as they are called out by the congregation. What a delight to work as a team with men who really know what makes you tick, and whom you know as special brothers and fellow laborers! I train our officers so that they will not be “yes men”, but also so that they will work helpfully with the ministry God has put before us. I also train them with a view toward their serving faithfully and effectively should the Lord take my life suddenly. They know that their pastor has a long term outlook on his work, and they have the same.

6. *A Long Term Pastorate is the Best for My Holiness*

After 22 years, the congregation in Franklin Square knows me almost as well as my family does! They know my faults (and they still want me to be their pastor!), my needs, my strengths, and my weaknesses. That helps me to serve them more honestly. It also enables me to function with the kind of transparency that I also must have before the God whom I serve. I want to grow for their sake as well as for my own sake, and I must grow or my ministry will stagnate. Also, I do not want to let them down. I want the congregation I serve to see, by the grace of God, a model of perseverance in faithful life and service. A long term pastorate, when it is not taken for granted, becomes an incomparable stimulus to “*let your progress be evident to all.*” (1 Tim. 4:15)

7. *The Love of the Congregation*

The congregation in Franklin Square has quite literally become second family to me and to my entire biological family as well. I have seen the wonderful fruits of this genuine Christian love over an extended period in my own children’s lives. They have witnessed elders who truly love them. (I account the yearly elder visits to our family as contributing in no small measure to our children’s seriousness about the Christian life and the importance of the Church). We have

learned something of the privilege of the benefits of “*houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children*”, cf. Mark 10:30, which are promised to those who serve Christ. Such reciprocal love is developed only with time and effort. It is easier to fill a slot as a pastor. It is far more rewarding to develop an extended family as the fruit of pastoral labor over an extended period of time.

8. The Benefit of Expanded Spheres of Service

As the church, my family, and I have developed over more than two decades, our opportunities for service have expanded as well. Interns have become a part of the church family and ministry here, and the subsequent ministries of the interns have a special place in the corporate heart of this church. Having worked through issues under a continuity of leadership over many years we have learned invaluable lessons which have been incorporated in our local way of doing things. This has become a help to many others who are looking for models of church ministry which have been forged by long-term practice rather than by fits and starts. And simply because, by God’s grace, I have been in one place for so long and have been privileged to see the blessing of God on the work here, others have asked for counsel as they long for similar blessings in their own local spheres of service. I have no secrets to share, but it is a joy to draw from twenty plus years of experience in one place rather than five years of experience multiplied by four places as I work to help others labor for the long haul in the places where Christ has put them.

Practical advice

I readily admit that a long-term pastorate in one place is not for everyone. The Lord of the Church uses some men to plant a church and then move to another area to do the same. He uses others to do the work of biblical reformation necessary in a local charge, then to do the same elsewhere. In other cases, because “*synods and councils may err ... and many have erred*” (WCF 31:4), a man may be called to a place that, humanly speaking, is not right for either him or the congregation. No doubt there are many other reasons why some ministers have a succession of shorter pastorates rather than one longer one. Nevertheless, I am convinced from both church history and practical experience that long term pastorates under conscientious laborers bring distinct advantages to pastor and congregation alike.

Increasingly younger men have asked for some “practical pointers” for effective long term pastorates. Keeping in mind that I have enjoyed a combination of factors that have made it “easy” for me to remain and labor here effectively, I offer the following as the most basic elements necessary for such a ministry:

1. Take Your Call with the Same Seriousness That You Give to Your Marriage Vows

Another local, regional, or denominational expression of Christ’s Church may, at some point, call you to service, and you may be given the freedom to accept such a call, but, otherwise, stick things out through thick and thin, just as you do in your marriage! At this point, for me to take a call elsewhere without being freed to do that by my fellow elders and the congregation would, for me, be the equivalent of going after another spouse! I believe that you must take your call that seriously if you are to have an effective long term pastorate.

2. Love The Congregation Christ Has Given You

I cannot overstate this! Love is giving yourself for the good of another, cf. Jn. 3:16. If you would build an effective long term pastorate you must not see your work as a career, but as a commitment of love to a growing, ever changing body of people in a particular field of service. This will cement your tie to your congregation and make even the thought of something other than long term ministry with them unimaginable. This will also put a check on the temptation to abuse the privileges you have earned over years of service. “*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.*” (1 Cor. 13:7) Without such love no man can have a long term pastorate (or any pastorate!) that truly reflects the persevering love of Christ.

3. **Work Hard!**

The ministry is no place for lazy men! How frequently does the Apostle Paul use the terms for working hard, e.g. 1 Cor. 4:12, 15:58, Col. 1:29, etc. and output of work, e.g. 2 Tim. 2:21, 3:17, etc. to describe the life of the minister and the work of the ministry. This is especially true for an effective long term pastorate. Without such labor, you will get complacent and both you and the church you “serve” will get in a rut. Any reasonably sensitive congregation sees the work that a conscientious minister does. The respect for that grows over time, especially as the congregation sees a minister being such a dedicated laborer year in and year out. You must work to let your progress be evident to all (1 Tim. 4:15) regardless of where you serve, but there is a special challenge in showing that progress in a situation in which such ministerial improvement is evident over a long period of time.

Ministers need to do all three of these things wherever they are called to serve, but I would much rather do them in one long run in a congregation in one place rather than in several short runs in many places. There is a need of sprinters in the ministry, but we are also in need of some marathon runners! For a pastor, there are few things more satisfying than to look out over a congregation he has served for many years, recollecting the highs and the lows of his ministry to them, and concluding his reverie by saying from the heart, *“For what **is** (my) hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? **Is it** not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy!”* (1 Thess. 2:19f.)

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